

The Third Turn Toward the Social: Nancy Welch's *Living Room*, Tony Scott's *Dangerous Writing*, and Rhetoric and Composition's Turn toward Grassroots Political Activism



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Abstract: This review essay examines recent texts by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, both of which use embodied activism as a starting point for their inquiries. Taken together, these works point to a distinct shift in composition studies' turn toward the social, one that calls on workers both within and outside the academy to actively engage in grassroots political struggle.

Welch, Nancy. *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2008: 175 pp.

Scott, Tony. *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2009: 199 pp.

For at least the last twenty-five years, the “turn toward the social” has been one of the dominant preoccupations in rhetoric and composition studies. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that the field’s primary emphasis ought to shift from teaching “the process”—that is, “a composing sequence from invention and drafting to revision and copy editing”—to teaching “a range of literate activities that challenge [. . .] a flawed social order” (Clifford and Ervin 179). But while “the social turn” represents many things to many people, we see three distinct shifts in this so-called turn. The first—which is perhaps best exemplified in scholarship in the vein of Kenneth Bruffee’s 1984 essay, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’”—emphasizes teaching writing and learning how to write as collaborative, interactive processes. The second shift grows out of the first, but, rather than focusing primarily on instructional practice, as James Berlin writes in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, it examines and critiques the signifying practices that shape subject formation—and, by extension, the discipline—“within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions” (83). While scholarship represented by the third social turn does not ignore classroom pedagogy or critical theory, it also does something quite more: it takes as its starting point embodied activism.

Such is the tie that binds Nancy Welch’s *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World* and Tony Scott’s *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*. Working within feminist, civil rights, and labor activist traditions, *Living Room* is both a broad look at what Welch calls “our neoliberal moment” (7)—that is, a political era in which the public sphere is increasingly privatized—and a provocative call for ordinary citizens to use “workers’ arguments” (107) to create space in which to speak and be heard. Taking a more focused look at the academy, Tony Scott’s *Dangerous Writing* considers the influence of the fast-capitalist economy on the teaching of writing, documenting how the material, rhetorical, and ideological conditions of universities in general—and college composition in particular—have been undermined in a post-Fordist economic landscape. Indeed, examined in relationship to each other, these books help to illuminate a distinct shift in the field’s turn toward the social, a shift that calls on workers both within and outside the academy to actively engage in grassroots political struggle.

Connecting rhetorical history with political activism, *Living Room* reflects on “the creative responses of earlier generations to constraints on (or prohibitions against) public visibility and voice” in order to “learn how individuals and groups, especially those lacking official platforms, have effectively argued for wider participation and greater democratization” (5). Welch focuses on a range of examples from labor history—including wildcat strikes spearheaded by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the “tent city” occupation led by labor activists at Welch’s academic home, the University of Vermont—to demonstrate how activists have successfully advanced their causes in spite of increasing privatization of public space. Interspersed with reflective “interludes” that examine her own experiences bringing private matters to voice in public arenas, Welch’s opening chapters trace the rise of neoliberalism and corporate privatization, exploring the decreased authority ordinary people have to speak in the

public sphere. The second half of her book examines how neoliberal values have influenced scholarship and teaching in the academy, offering insightful criticisms of postmodern feminist rhetorics (particularly in chapter three), as well as reflections on how public forums at the University of Vermont allowed Welch and her students to imagine “rhetoric not as a specialized or bureaucratic *techne* but as a mass practical art” (144). In short, Welch deftly connects her private experiences inside and outside the academy with historical examples that offer readers embodied examples of grassroots political activism.

Where Welch weaves in and out of scholarly chapters and personal interludes, Scott's organization is more predictable in presentation. Rather than building on themes recursively, *Dangerous Writing* offers readers a linear map of the book's structure, which allows Scott to provide a clear presentation of the political economy of higher education on both the macro and micro levels. Scott opens the book by exploring the established dynamics of composition instruction and the framework of labor and management through the lens of academic corporatization, followed by a fascinating chapter examining how the textbook industry influences and organizes the labor of writing instruction. Further developing his Marxist activist framework, Scott's third chapter examines class distinctions as they divide a variety of public spheres, while chapter four provides case studies from Scott's teaching in which students consider themselves as part of the labor/management struggle. Finally, in chapter five, Scott's work culminates in a call to action that requires the field to reimagine its praxis in a post-writing program age, a new disciplinary era that eliminates contingent labor and affords all composition workers full professional status. In short, the goal of the book is to “argue for a more active view of the social as a means of connecting writing more immediately to material concerns” (31) and to “positively transform the particular historical and material circumstances of production inside and outside of academia” (32). Collectively, the chapters in *Dangerous Writing* seek not only to transform how students think about their working lives, but to change the way working- and middle-class faculty think about the material conditions that influence writing instruction.

As we hope our description of their chapters makes clear, both Welch and Scott engage in a relatively new but growing tradition of scholarship that moves beyond pedagogy and theory to engage in political and institutional activism. In *Living Room*, Welch is following in the footsteps of scholarship such as Jacqueline Rhodes's *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modern*, Stephen Parks's *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean Williams's “History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies,” Susan Wells's “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What do We Want from Public Writing?,” and Jane Greer's “No Smiling Madonna: Marian Wharton and the Struggle to Construct a Critical Pedagogy for the Working Class, 1914-1917.” Like *Living Room*, all of these titles place rhetoric and composition within a historical trajectory of radical political activism. Of course, as her subtitle suggests, Welch is also placing her work within the wider theoretical tradition of Nancy Fraser, Jurgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Gilles Deleuze, who are all “primarily interested in how to create ‘strong publics’ or viable ‘counter-publics’ within or apart from the social and economic policies that have privatized public space, decision making, and resources” (5). Building on feminist and workers' rhetorics, Welch's book argues that teaching rhetoric in the neoliberal moment requires more than teaching students to become “geographers” of “Discourse Maps”: it requires the recognition that every discourse is limited by its material borders and that the power of any rhetorical strategy is “contingent upon extralinguistic factors, including social position and credentials” (26).

Similarly, Scott's *Dangerous Writing* makes the argument that writing pedagogy needs to proceed from the assumption that language is always imbricated in the political economy. He addresses the potential of working-class rhetorics for teaching writing, but he questions their efficacy for making arguments in the fast-capitalist economy: an economy in which, he argues, the majority of today's students are working in low-wage jobs. But where Welch perceives the rise of neoliberalism as a direct threat to the functionality and utility of rhetoric within and without the classroom, Scott explores how neoliberal practices work to define the politics of the academy at its core levels—in its students, its programs, and even its textbooks. In as much as *Dangerous Writing* takes on a Marxist political economic stance, it is in keeping with Richard Ohmann's *Politics of Knowledge: The Commercialization of the University, the Professions, and Print Culture*, Bruce Horner's *Terms of Work: A Materialist Critique*, Min-Zhan Lu's “An Essay on the Work of Composition: Composing English Against the Order of Fast Capitalism,” Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*, and perhaps most centrally, Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. In some ways, however, Scott posits himself as much within this intellectual tradition as against another: that is, what he asserts as the growing tradition of pragmatic administrative rhetoric, which he associates with writers such as Joseph Harris, Michael Murphy, and especially Richard Miller.

Read as case studies of how late-twentieth and early twenty-first century capitalism directly influences higher education, both *Living Room* and *Dangerous Writing* provide fascinating looks at how political economies have worked to shape functioning, applied systems. More specifically, because it participates in a compelling intersection of various discourses within and beyond the academy, including rhetoric and rhetorical history, composition, political activism, and critiques of neoliberalism, Welch's *Living Room* is of particular value for anyone interested in

interdisciplinary approaches to rhetorical theory and working class and labor histories. Though Welch's pedagogic interventions are more tacitly presented—which, for some readers, may make the book at least partially flawed—those familiar with her previous work in composition will recognize Welch's continued assertion of the political value of “creative” and “personal” writing. To our minds, the most powerful example Welch provides chronicles a student first posting and then distributing a “ransom poem” titled “Action Alert: Bush Agenda.” Building on Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács's assertion that the fragmentation of the polis to a group of individuals exercising individual choice reduces the “human qualities and idiosyncrasies [to] mere sources of error,” Welch argues that we need to guide students in collecting the private with the public: in other words, “we need to take it all very personally” (119). “Our most common conception of academic freedom,” she writes, “doesn't articulate the value and necessity of seeing and understanding a subject in relation to others” (120). Because the book does just this, it charts new ground not only in rhetoric and composition studies, but in the larger interdisciplinary treatments of grassroots political activism.

From our position as scholars and workers in rhetoric and composition, Scott's book seems to be both more applicable to classroom practice—which we find to be *Dangerous Writing*'s significant strength—and less revolutionary in its assertions. In our view, much of the criticism Scott wages at pragmatic administrative rhetoric recycles points made by Marc Bousquet, first in his 2002 JAC article “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA,” later in an anthologized version of the same piece in Bousquet, Scott, and Leo Parascondola's *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, and finally in Bousquet's book, *How the University Works*. What is troubling about Scott's treatment of pragmatic administrative rhetoric isn't his claim that the fast-capitalist political economy creates the need for writing program administrators—we agree with this assertion—but that Scott falls into the same reductionist trap for which Bousquet's work has been rightly criticized. Indeed, both writers too often ignore the material gains labor-conscious writing program administrators establish, instead choosing to stereotype WPAs as cogs in the corporate-university machine. While the vast majority of Scott's book rises above such stereotypes, we see them clearly in the final pages of *Dangerous Writing*, particularly when Scott writes, “As the WPA appeals to the ‘bottom line’ values of those who talk in terms of scalability and cost-cutting, she salvages what she can for quality pedagogy and working conditions” (184). What first Bousquet and now Scott fail to acknowledge, however, is that through their rhetorical maneuvering, many WPAs are actually *improving* labor conditions in writing programs: by asserting that pragmatic rhetoric is *salvaging* working conditions, Scott implies those working conditions had to have been *equitable* at some point in history. While there may have been a recent past in which working conditions for literature specialists like Bousquet were equitable, as a specialist in rhetoric and composition studies—a field in which working conditions have always been deplorable—Scott should know better than to reassert this claim.

But despite minor limitations, both *Living Room* and *Dangerous Writing* should be heralded as issuing in the important third wave of the social turn: for the ways that their work demands that the field move beyond the merely pedagogical and theoretical and into the realm of embodied political activism, Welch and Scott usher in a long overdue upsurge of scholarship. We look forward to a rising tide.

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